

“Does God Repent?”  
Jonah 3:10  
(Preached at Trinity, January 3, 2016)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

**Disclaimer:** These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. Last time we considered the difficult issue of the repentance of the Ninevites. We know that God saved individuals in the Old Testament but no one has ever been saved apart from the redeeming work of Christ. This saving work demands faith and repentance. Old Testament saints were saved by believing in God's promise of a Redeemer, even though they didn't have a full understanding of the fulfillment. Their faith was based upon the knowledge that they had. God full revelation would shine forth in Christ.  
**John 1:14 NAU** - "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth."
2. I also pointed out that there were times when God threatened temporal judgment upon the wickedness of individuals and nations and demanded that they turn from their wicked ways. God is the God of all the earth. He demands that all nations submit to His Law. God is threatening physical judgment upon Nineveh because of their wickedness. Upon their repentance God turned away from His judgment upon them.
3. It isn't important for us to know for certain whether Nineveh's repentance was based upon an apprehension of God's judgment or a true turning towards God in faith trusting their lives to Him. What we do know is that God in His mercy saw their repentance and turned from His judgment  
**Jonah 3:10 NAU** - "God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do *it*."
4. The word "relented" is interesting. It is from the Hebrew word, **נָחַם**  
The word has various uses.
  - It can refer to a change of heart or to change your mind  
**1 Samuel 15:29 NAU** - "Also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind."
  - It is one of the Hebrew words for "repentance"  
**Job 42:6 NAU** - "Therefore I retract, And I repent in dust and ashes."  
**Jeremiah 8:6 NAU** - "I have listened and heard, They have spoken what is not right; No man repented of his wickedness, Saying, 'What have I done?' Everyone turned to his course, Like a horse charging into the battle."

- It is the word used in Genesis 6 as God observed the wickedness of the world in Noah's day. Here it describes grief and sorrow.

**Genesis 6:6 NAU** - "The LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart."

**Genesis 6:6 KJV** - "And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart."

5. Jonah 3:9-10 is one of several passages that refer to God repenting or changing His mind. How are we to understand this word as we apply it to the essence of God? Does God change His mind? Does He repent?
6. In order to answer this we have to understand the nature of God. Tonight I want us to consider this question and then apply it to how we must respond

## I. The nature of God

- A. Too often we try to define God according to our understanding of man.
  1. The Bible affirms that God isn't like man  
**Isaiah 55:8-9 NAU** - "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways," declares the LORD. <sup>9</sup> "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts."
  2. God is Creator – we are creatures  
God is infinite – we are finite  
God is perfectly holy – we are sinful
- B. There are elements of God's existence that help us understand passages that declare God's repentance
  1. The Aseity of God – from the Latin meaning "from self"  
God's being is derived from Himself. God is uncaused. He is self-originating, self-sufficient, fully independent.
    - a. God isn't becoming. He is. He doesn't have potential.
    - b. There is nothing outside of God that affects the being of God
    - c. This means that the actions of the Ninevites did not infringe upon God's independence and infinite autonomy
  2. The omniscience of God
    - a. God knows all things. He doesn't learn. He doesn't acquire new information. God has always known all that He knows
    - b. This means God knew both the wickedness of the Ninevites and their repentance long before the world was created
  3. The immutability of God – God is unchanging  
**Hebrews 13:8 NAU** - "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."
    - a. Again, there is nothing that can bring about a change in God. He can neither increase nor decrease.
    - b. Human beings are ever changing. We are born and then go through a lifetime of change.
    - c. God cannot undergo change. It is contrary to His essence.  
**Numbers 23:19 NAU** - "God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent; Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?"

**1 Samuel 15:29 NAU** - "Also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind."

- d. Samuel Renihan – “God is not subject to time and succession, addition and subtraction, mutation and corruption. For this reason, nothing happens to God. He is not living the roller coaster of time that we do. Thus, when God displays love or shows mercy, or does anything in time and space, it was decreed immutably from all eternity.”
- C. This is closely tied to the debate that has plagued our association this past year—what is called the impassability of God.
1. There is nothing outside of God that changes Him. We don’t say that God has emotions in the ways human beings have emotions.
    - a. We *become* angry. God doesn’t become. He is.
    - b. We fall in love and then cease loving. We have love and then we lose it.  
“God is love.” Love is what God *is*, not what he *has* or *becomes*.
    - c. God has infinite love. There isn’t anything external to Him that causes His infinite love to become more or less.
  2. God’s attributes are absolute and unchanging. He is what He is and He is what He has forever been.
  3. How are we to explain the many passages that ascribe to God emotions?  
Examples:
    - a. There are passages that say God is grieved  
This is the essence of the word אָנַח  
**Jonah 3:10 NAU** - "When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it."  
It could be translated, “God was sorry or grieved concerning the calamity which He had declared.”  
This is how the **Genesis 6** passage translates it  
**Genesis 6:5-6 NAU** - "Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. <sup>6</sup>  
The LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart."
    - b. We find the emotion of grief applied to God in **Psalms 78**  
**Psalms 78:40 NAU** - "How often they rebelled against Him in the wilderness And grieved Him in the desert!"
    - c. Passages that describe God as being pleased  
**1 Kings 3:10 NAU** - "It was pleasing in the sight of the Lord that Solomon had asked this thing."
    - d. God is described as feeling joy  
**Zephaniah 3:17 NAU** - "The LORD your God is in your midst, A victorious warrior. He will exult over you with joy, He will be quiet in His love, He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy."

- e. God is describes as having burning anger  
**Judges 2:14 NAU** - "The anger of the LORD burned against Israel"
4. Classical theism refers to these as anthropathisms
- a. We've often seen the expression of the term anthropomorphism – the figurative expression of ascribing human physical metaphors – the *hands* of God or the *eyes* of God, or the *mouth* of God, etc.
  - b. Anthropathisms are figurative expressions apply human emotions to God. The Bible describes God repenting, His anger, pity, joy, pleasure, love, jealousy, and hatred.
  - c. In passages like **Genesis 6** we can see both anthropathisms and anthropomorphism.  
**Genesis 6:6 NAU** - "The LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart."
    - God doesn't have a heart – this is anthropomorphism
    - Literally it says God was hurt or pained in His heart – God doesn't experience pain like men.
  - d. Classical theism holds that we do NOT have such power over God as to cause Him to experience involuntary emotions. To hold to this is to say that God is not in full control over His own mind.  
**1 Samuel 15:29 NAU** - "Also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind." - מִן־דָּבָר
5. When we find these passages we should understand them as God condescending to us in describing Him as being like us
1. When we read that God relents or changes His mind we must not see it as the same as when we change our mind.
  2. Michael Horton describes it well.  
 “When one says that God is good and Sally is good the predicate ‘good’ is used neither univocally (i.e. identically) or equivocally (i.e. with no actual similarity), but analogically. Analogical thinking identifies certain aspects of the unknown in terms of the known and familiar.”

II. This is where our theology must maintain a balance between God's sovereignty and human responsibility

- A. The wickedness of Nineveh had risen up to God  
**Jonah 1:1-2 NAU** - "The word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying, <sup>2</sup> "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me."
1. By God's foreknowledge He had always known their wickedness.  
 God knows all things at once, He sees all things at once  
 We can only think in a linear fashion – one thought following another.  
 God knows all things at once.  
 So it's only from our perspective that their wickedness had become “known” to God.

2. Foreknowledge with God is more than merely knowing before.
    - a. Things do not happen because God knows them but because He has decreed them – He has willed them to come to pass
    - b. God’s foreknowledge demands fixity – in other words, the things God foreknows in eternity are of necessity fixed in time. They are fixed because God fixed them. This is called God’s divine decree.
    - c. Robert Haldane – “God foreknows what will be, by determining what shall be.”
  3. God decreed the actions of the Ninevites, while remaining separate from their sin. Their sin flowed forth from their wicked hearts.  
LBC 3:1 – “God hath decreed in Himself, from all eternity, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably, all things, whatsoever comes to pass; yet so as thereby is God neither the author of sin, nor hath fellowship with any therein; nor is violence offered to the will of the creature . . .”
  4. Many have a problem with God decreeing all things, and still holding men accountable for their sin. While teaching on the doctrine of election Paul anticipated this very objection:  
**Romans 9:18-23 NAU** - "So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires. <sup>19</sup> You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?" <sup>20</sup> On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this," will it? <sup>21</sup> Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use? <sup>22</sup> What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? <sup>23</sup> And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory"
- B. This is where it is important to maintain the necessity of human responsibility.
1. The actions of the Ninevites were all decreed by God. There are no accidents. Nothing happens by chance. God works all things after the counsel of His own will.
  2. And yet, the actions of the Ninevites were wicked and brought them under the judgment of God. They were following the desires of their wicked hearts. God was sending Jonah to command them to repent.  
**Jonah 1:2 NAU** - "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it"
  3. The Ninevites were accountable for their sin. They had the responsibility of turning from their sin.  
But even their turning was by the Divine decree of God. In His mercy God granted them the grace of repentance.  
**Romans 9:14-16 NAS** - "There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! <sup>15</sup> For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." <sup>16</sup> So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy."

4. This means that God decreed the wickedness of the Ninevites and decreed their repentance. He also decreed that He would turn His anger away from them.

#### Conclusion:

1. So what does all of this mean for you?  
It means that we serve an infinite, eternal, and unchanging God. This gives us wonderful comfort. God reigns over all things. We can rest in peace with this knowledge.
2. But from our perspective we are moving through time. We make decisions that have consequences. Had the Ninevites not repented they would have been destroyed. From their prospective they had no knowledge of God's decree. And neither do we.
3. God's decree is secret. But one thing we do know. We are accountable for our sin. We are accountable for repentance. And God promises us that if we repent and trust in Christ we will be saved.